

I. INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from a study of self-services systems within the One-Stop context. Self-services are intended to be a critical linchpin of One-Stop service delivery, because of their potential for cost-effectively furthering the universality of services and promoting customer choice. It also is in keeping with the service delivery system envisioned by the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), which stipulates that One-Stop Career Centers should provide open access to so-called “core services,” which are intended to provide broad resources and tools to job seekers and employers with minimal staff assistance.

As part of this study, we examined self-services systems in eight selected One-Stop Career Centers that were identified as being particularly efficacious or noteworthy on any of a number of dimensions, including the completeness of the resources they made available, ease of use or access for customers, or provisions for reaching out to special populations. This report describes what we found and is intended to identify constraints and challenges to effective implementation and to provide examples of well-developed features from which a practitioner audience may benefit. As such, it offers both analytic content and practical guidance.

BACKGROUND

Early in this decade, the General Accounting Office issued a number of reports that drew critical focus on the fragmentation of the nation’s employment and training system.¹ Prodded by this attention, as well as on-going efforts within the Clinton Administration to streamline government services in the interests of fostering greater efficiency,² the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) undertook an important initiative to promote the consolidation of workforce development services. As part of this effort, DOL awarded planning

¹ See, for example, U.S. General Accounting Office (1994) “Multiple Employment Training Programs: Overlap Among Programs Raises Questions About Efficiency.”

² A prime moving force in this regard was the Gore Report of the National Performance Review (1993), “Creating a Government That Works Better and Costs Less.”

and implementation grants to states and local Learning Laboratories to begin the formation of a One-Stop service delivery system. The principles that constituted the four cornerstones of this effort were to promote:

- Universal access, by which core workforce development services would be available to all interested persons, including job seekers and employers, regardless of their eligibility for specific categorical programs.
- Customer choice, in the sense of giving customers multiple methods of access and the opportunity to select services and service providers that they feel best meet their needs.
- Service integration, which should result in a seamless system of services.
- Accountability for outcomes, by which systems would monitor outcomes and their use of taxpayer funds and make modifications to service delivery accordingly.

In this effort, DOL foreshadowed the major tenets of WIA, the workforce legislation that supplanted the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). Substituting for JTPA's emphasis on tightly restricted eligibility for providing training services to the economically disadvantaged, WIA Title I, by contrast, emphasizes a three-tier approach to services, consisting of core services, intensive services, and training services. Core services, the broadest tier, are to be made available to all those who might be interested (i.e., the universal customer), and are expected to include career information, Internet browsing of job listings, access to labor market information, job referrals, information about education and training providers, and the like. Intensive services, the next highest rung, are reserved for those who would be unable to obtain employment through core services alone, and can consist of counseling, case management, and short-term prevocational services. Finally, in the tier that is most like JTPA, training services, consisting of skill upgrading through literacy services and occupational skills training, will be provided only to those unable to benefit through core and intensive services, with priority given to public assistance recipients and low-income individuals.

In the context of core services, self-services play a critical role for a number of reasons. First, self-service approaches allow access for all population groups to a broad array of services and information.

Moreover, because customers need not follow a rigid sequence of activities or adhere to an externally imposed schedule (e.g., for class meetings or group sessions), they are empowered to select those service offerings from which they think they can derive the most benefit and do so at the times that are most convenient for them. Further, the electronic delivery of services that often is part-and-parcel of the self-service approach means that customers can enjoy the convenience of accessing information at odd hours or at remote locations (e.g., from home or the office, kiosks, etc.). Apart from convenience and flexibility, the sense of empowerment promoted by self-services may be especially valuable for those customers who might be feeling a sense of helplessness as a result of recent poor labor market experiences.

From the systemic point of view, self-services has other obvious advantages relating to its presumed cost efficiency. If One-Stop Career Centers truly endeavor to offer services that may be useful to a wide spectrum of customers, including both employers and job seekers, then ensuring that large numbers of people can get the services they need hinges on the Center's ability to deliver many services with minimal staff involvement. Thus, drawing on the often used analogy of the service-delivery system as a pyramid, a broad base of people might self-serve by selecting from an array of electronic or other resources, freeing staff to concentrate efforts on a middle-tier in need of group activities or brief staff interventions and a still smaller tier who need time-intensive, individually-tailored interventions. This scheme is very consistent with WIA, which, in addition to core services, establishes a mechanism for delivering *intensive services* and *training services*; the former consists of career counseling, in-depth assessment and testing, and case management and will require modest staff effort, while the latter includes structured work experience and classroom training, and which will generally be provided through a network of providers.

STUDY DESIGN

In mid 1997, Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) was awarded a contract to undertake a process study of self-services systems in the One-Stop context. The research objectives of this study were to identify exemplary practices in the use of self-service strategies and understand the constraints and challenges involved in setting up well-developed systems. Among the specific issues we investigated

were:

- (1) Features that distinguish *effective physical designs* for self-help Centers, including accessibility, convenience, and completeness.
- (2) Strategies for *facilitating access*, including how self-services were being promoted and how users were oriented to the available resources.
- (3) The feasibility of designing *effective resource tools*, including those characterized by clarity, ease of use, appropriateness for targeted audiences, and a useful and high-quality content.
- (4) *Strategies for overcoming barriers* to effective implementation, including adapting existing tools to make them more appropriate for the needs of the local area, providing adequate staff training, providing assistance to customers to enable them to use tools effectively, and ensuring access for those with limited technical skills.
- (5) *Types of customers* for which self-service strategies are designed or intended.
- (6) The methods Centers have devised for *tracking usage and customer outcomes and satisfaction*.

The research design for looking at these issues involved visits by study team members to selected One-Stop Career Centers around the country to learn about their self-services systems. Because the focus of the study was on learning from the experiences of systems that had made some substantial progress in the design and delivery of self-services, we were interested in selecting sites to study that had exemplary or otherwise noteworthy self-service features. Thus, rather than selecting One-Stop Career Centers randomly, as one might normally do in an evaluation study, we opted to rely on purposive selection.

We used a multi-tiered filtering system to identify sites to visit. As part of this strategy, we first conducted telephone conversations with One-Stop leads at each of the DOL Regional Offices, to solicit nominations of either local sites or states that reputedly were farthest advanced in developing self-services facilities. Because SPR had previously conducted studies of One-Stop Career Centers, we were able to supplement this list of nominees with others that SPR staff members could recommend. This first-tier process resulted in the nomination of 20 states and a number of local One-Stop Career Centers

or Learning Labs.

Moving on to the next step in the process, we contacted the One-Stop leads within each state that had been nominated, asking them, in turn, to nominate individual One-Stop Career Centers within their state. When combined with local Centers that had been nominated from the first round, this strategy resulted in a total of 30 nominees.

Finally, we contacted the Center Director at each of these 30 by telephone and asked them to describe their self-service facilities, including: how their Resource Rooms or other self-service facilities were designed to support the development of self-accessed services for job seekers and employers; how their Center addressed the service needs of universal customers, including individuals with disabilities, youths, and first time job seekers; strategies they used to facilitate customers' access and orient them to services; what resources and tools were available, and in what form; and what elements were perceived to be of especially high quality and why.

Based on the information we collected from these telephone calls, we ultimately selected eight sites that would be visited in person and that would become the focus of our study. These eight are identified in Table I-1. Although each of these Centers warranted their selection for one reason or another, we emphasize that many sites that had been nominated but which were left off this list also demonstrated high-quality self-service designs. Conversely, the ones we selected should not necessarily be taken to represent the eight Centers with the best self-service capacities in the nation. Instead, in addition to looking for sites that demonstrated well-developed systems, we strove for broad regional representation and sometimes singled out a site for selection because it had one particular feature from which we thought we could learn a great deal.

The next phase of the study consisted of on-site data collection, lasting approximately 2½ days each, to the eight One-Stop Career Centers that are shown in the table. During these site visits, which took place during the last half of 1998, we undertook a number of data collection activities, including detailed conversations with system administrators, planners and hardware/software designers, and Resource Room staff. We also conducted focus groups or one-on-one conversations with customers, including both job seekers and

**Table I-1:
The Sites Selected for the Study**

The Melbourne Job Link Center: Brevard County, FL
The Bloomington Workforce Development Center: Bloomington, IN
The Work Place: Boston, MA
The Workforce Center of Anoka County: Anoka County, MN
Capital of Texas Workforce Center (South): Austin/Travis County, TX
The Morrisville Career Resource Center: Morrisville, VT
The Career Development Center: Renton, WA
The Workforce Development Center: Racine, WI

employers. A summary list of topics that we addressed with these respondents is included in Exhibit I-1.

Additional data gathering consisted of the collection of written materials, such as brochures describing the facilities and instruction booklets or help guides. We also observed customers using the facilities, paying particular attention to what it was they were doing, how comfortable they were in their tasks, and how or if they interacted with staff. Finally, we played the role of the job seeker—in essence, putting ourselves in the customers' shoes—by trying out the various software and accessing Web sites, to gauge for ourselves how comprehensive the available resources were and how easy they were to use.

FOCUS OF THE REPORT

Rather than being discrete and with clear boundaries, self-services can be thought of as constituting a continuum. On the one extreme, some customers truly do access resources made available through workforce development initiatives with no staff assistance of any kind. The clearest example of this might be the job seeker who accesses from home any one of a number of excellent Web sites that provide information about job listings, labor market information, and more, including DOL's America's Job Bank and America's Labor Market Information System (ALMIS). These sites were established just a few years ago and have proven very successful and are presumably enormously helpful to users, as evidenced by the millions

of “hits” these sites achieve each month. However, access to such sites from the home were not the focus of our investigation, even though in some sense they constitute self-services more clearly than anything else does.

Instead, we focus on the Resource Rooms that Centers have established, which typically provide a number of hard-copy and electronic resources and which are open to the public on a walk-in basis. These physical facilities are described in Chapter II, including tradeoffs that Centers make in configuring Resource Rooms to allow customers some privacy while retaining the flavor of an open and accessible space. We also detail in this chapter the types of hardware that is made available, including computers, copiers, fax machines, TVs for viewing videos, and phone banks.

Facilitating access is the topic addressed in Chapter III. Centers want to attract diverse customers to the Resource Room and publicize the tools that are available. Centers also find that most customers not only need an initial orientation to the facility, but will need help on an ongoing, if intermittent basis as well, for such things as figuring out how to use various software packages. If the continuum of the self-serve model thus begins with a customer accessing Web sites remotely from the home or office, the need that most Resource Room customers have for at least some staff assistance makes the point that the continuum shades off at the other end into staff-assisted services. We also discuss in this chapter provisions that some Centers have made for making their facilities and resources accessible to special populations, such as public assistance recipients or persons with disabilities, and we discuss their other strategies for facilitating access, such as establishing kiosks or other remote access points. Finally, we describe the ways Centers track customer usage and outcomes.

The importance of staff assistance for orienting customers to self-services leads to the conclusion that Resource Room staffing is essential to its effective operation. How Centers staff Resource Rooms, staff members’ responsibilities, and the training they get are addressed in Chapter IV.

Exhibit I-1
Topics That Guided On-Site Data Collection

I. Topics Addressed with System Administrators, Planners, and Designers

- Goals and objectives of the self-service system.
- Interplay of state guidelines and discretion afforded local One-Stop Career Centers.
- Types of hardware/software used to deliver self-service tools and resources.
- How self-service Resource Rooms were designed (e.g., how physical layout was decided on, how decisions were made as to what tools/resources to include, etc.).
- How self-service facilities are staffed and how staff are trained.
- Types of resources/tools available and how decisions were made as to what products to make available.
- How tools/resources were developed, including ways in which products were customized/adapted to fit the needs of the local area and its customers.
- Intended target audience and projected levels of usage.
- Ways in which self-services are intended to be used by customers, including both job seekers and employers.
- Ways in which flexible access was promoted, including remote access.
- Ways in which tools and resources were made more accessible for customers with special needs (e.g., those with disabilities or with limited-English language proficiency).
- Assessment of the adequacy of the resources available, including the quality of the content and the quality of the design (e.g., degree to which it is flexible, user-friendly, includes relevant and accurate information, etc.).
- Balance struck between the efficiencies in self-service designs and the need/desire of customers for personalized attention.
- Perceptions of key features that make self-service systems and resources effective.
- Methods of monitoring customer usage and satisfaction.
- Assessment of customer satisfaction with the products and facilities.

II. Topics Addressed with Resource Room Staff

- Characteristics and background of staff, including familiarity with the self-service tools and resources and training received in their use.
- Participant volumes and flows and how they are tracked.
- Types of customers using self-service systems and their needs.
- Types of support or assistance routinely provided to customers (e.g., by way of orientation sessions, tours of the facilities, etc.).
- Types of support or assistance customers seek.
- Types of customers who seem to have the greatest ease or the greatest difficulty in using the self-service systems.
- Perceptions of the adequacy of the support provided to customers using self-service systems.
- Perceptions of the effectiveness/quality of the resources and tools made available.
- Perceptions of ways in which the self-service Center or its resources could be made more responsive to customer needs.
- Perceptions of additional resources or tools of benefit to customers.

III. Topics Addressed with Customers

- Intended objectives in accessing self-service tools and resources.
- How customers learned about the facilities.
- Tools and resources they have accessed.
- Frequency of usage (e.g., how many times they have used self-service tools and resources, how frequently they have used them, etc.).
- Assistance they received in using tools and resources from Center staff and adequacy of the assistance.
- Other services they have accessed from the One-Stop Career Center (e.g., are they also participating in group workshops or training, etc.).
- Evaluation of the quality of the content of each of the tools and resources they have used (e.g., is information useful, accurate, and of the type desired).
- Evaluation of the quality of the design (e.g., flexibility, ease of use, etc.).
- Suggestions for improvements to the self-service Center, such as tools or additional resources they would like to see made available.

Chapter V then goes to the heart of the Resource Room's functions by describing the resources and tools that are typically made available. This chapter makes clear that Centers are faced with a number of challenges in ensuring that resources and tools can be used effectively, and it describes some strategies that Centers have devised to overcome them.

Employers are intended to be an important customer of One-Stop Career Centers. But Centers face special challenges in devising self-services for this important constituency. Some of the strategies they have devised are described in Chapter VI.

Chapter VII presents a summary of the cross-site observations and draws some general conclusions. By way of providing some examples of whole systems, Appendix A then presents brief Project Profiles, which describe the major features of the Resource Rooms we visited.

Additional resources for the practitioner are presented in Appendix B. This appendix consists of a Resources List that includes guidance on where the practitioner might go for additional information on some of the topics we cover in this report, with the focus on resources that can be used to develop actionable steps. Excerpts from or copies of some of these resources are presented in Appendix D, which comes at the end of the Report. Meanwhile, Appendix C presents contact information for our study sites, should a practitioner wish to contact staff at one of our sites to learn a bit more about their practices that are described in this report.